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Heaven and Man from a cross-cultural perspective

Dear madame President, distinguished members of the Royal Academy, friends, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honor for me to have been elected a foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, and I am very happy to have this opportunity today to address members of the Academy and present to you my thoughts on a topic central to our understanding of China and its culture in comparison with that of the West.

Before a sudden and debilitating financial crisis struck Asia in 1997, a discourse on "Asian values" was actively presented as a cultural explanation for the extraordinary economic growth in East Asia, particularly South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the so-called "four little dragons" of East Asia, all of which were thought to have been influenced by the tradition of a Confucian culture. Advocates of "Asian values" include politicians, notably the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, but also such eminent scholars as William Theodore de Bary of Columbia University in the US and Tu Wei-Ming at Harvard. Those who argue for Asian values tend to construct a systematic contrast between Eastern and Western "ways of thinking," between a "holistic" and an "analytic," or "individualistic" and "communitarian"

approach in thinking and action. The dichotomy between Confucian or Chinese culture and European culture was based on simplistic stereotypes.

The incredibly fast development and the emergence of China as an economic and political world power in the last few decades should have broken many of the old stereotypes. A visit of Beijing, Shanghai, and many other cities in China today should permanently cure a Western visitor of those outdated romantic images of an exotic, static, collectively oriented China immune to change and temporal events. China as a living culture is a contemporary reality, not an archaeological specimen of a frozen past. And yet, old ideas and stereotypes persist; and not surprisingly, we still have echoes of the discourse of "Asian values" today when some Chinese scholars put forward a dichotomous view of the East and the West.

Here I would like to examine a particular variation of the "Asian values" discourse, namely the argument about a perfectly harmonious relationship between "heaven and man" in traditional Chinese cosmology and philosophical thinking as opposed to an allegedly antagonistic attitude towards nature in the West. Quite often, such an argument is combined with a strong sentiment of nationalism and patriotism, and thus becomes a profession of one's faith in the superiority of Eastern culture with emotional appeal rather than a careful examination of facts and convincing evidence. For example, Professor Ji Xianlin, a highly respected senior scholar in China and a champion for the values of Eastern culture, often sets up an absolute East-West dichotomy and maintains that the fundamental differences between the East and the West "ultimately come from the differences in the modes of thinking," because "the Eastern mode of thinking is synthetic, while the Western mode of thinking is analytic".[1] For him, analysis somehow equals aggression and violence in dealing with nature, for "the guiding principle in Western thinking is to conquer nature; while the guiding principle in Eastern thinking, with its basis in a synthetic mode, advocates the merging with

nature and all things. The West attacks nature vehemently and takes all natural resources by force and with violence"; while Eastern culture, operating under the principle of "the unity of heaven and man," treats nature with love and caring tenderness.[2] According to him, the aggressive Western analytic mode of thinking is responsible for all the ills of the world today. With Western culture prevailing in the modern times, he says:

> The world's ecological balance is destroyed, acid rain causes havoc everywhere, fresh water resources are drastically reduced, air is polluted, the ozone layer is damaged, rivers, seas, and oceans suffer from pollution, some species become extinct, new diseases emerge, and all these put the future development, and even the very existence, of mankind in jeopardy. If these disasters and threats are not overcome, humanity will not be able to survive in less than a hundred years.[3]

While issuing such an apocalyptic warning of the imminent end of humanity, he offers Eastern culture as the necessary remedy. "Is there any way of salvation?" asks Professor Ji. The answer is of course yes: the world will be fine so long as we "bring the synthetic mode of thinking in Eastern culture to rescue the collapse of the Western analytic mode of thinking. People must first follow the philosophical thinking of the Chinese or the Easterners, of which the most important is the idea of 'the unity of heaven and man'; they must make friends with nature and mend their ways completely from evil to good. Only with such changes," he concludes, prophet-like, "can humanity continue to exist in happiness".[4] One can hardly find a more absolute dichotomy between the Eastern and Western "modes of thinking"; nor can one find a more forceful articulation of the spirit of Chinese nationalism, the belief in the superiority of Chinese or Eastern culture over the West. But what exactly is this "unity of heaven and man"? Is such an idea uniquely Chinese and diametrically opposed to the "Western way of thinking"? What happens if we go beyond the dichotomy and look at that idea his-

torically, try to find some textual evidence, some exemplary quotations, and examine that idea from the perspective of cross-cultural studies?

Tian ren he yi, literary "heaven and man merging into one," is indeed an old idea in Chinese thinking that can be traced back to concepts and notions first manifested in several ancient books and their commentaries. The idea of *tian* or heaven as the supreme authority that keeps all things in order and legitimates the kingly rule on earth already existed in such old classics as the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Poetry*, the Confucian *Analects*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, etc. It is an idea held by philosophers of different schools, not just the Confucians. In the chapter on the "Will of Heaven" in the book of *Mozi*, for example, we find a clear expression of this idea: "When the son of heaven does something good, heaven can reward him. When the son of heaven does evil, heaven can punish him."[5] The son of heaven refers to the ruler, a king or an emperor, and Mozi here articulates the ancient idea that heaven has the power to reward or punish the ruler for what he does, and to accord a political regime its legitimacy. In Mozi's conceptualization, heaven becomes an anthropomorphic deity with will and power, "a religious force that all must obey and do as its will dictates".[6] This idea is assimilated into Confucian political philosophy, and the assimilation is very important for the development of Confucianism.

It is not just Mozi, however, but also other schools of ancient Chinese thought that understand heaven as a supreme power over and beyond the human world. This can be seen, for instance, in the chapter on the "Revolution of Heaven" in the Taoist book of *Zhuangzi*: "Heaven has six dimensions and five constant elements. Following heaven, the king will rule in good order, but going against heaven, the king will bring about disasters."[7] The relationship between heaven and the ruler is clearly established in a framework of correspondence and unity, in which to follow the will of heaven is crucial for a successful and good government. The Gongyang school of commentaries on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in particular adumbrated the idea of the unity of heaven

and man, which was then further developed during the Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–25 C.E.).

The famous scholar and statesman Dong Zhongshu (179–104 B.C.E.) is a key figure in the history of Confucianism. As an erudite scholar who played an important role in assimilating much of the knowledge available in his time – the theories of *yin* and *yang*, of the five elements that constitute the world, of stars and the other heavenly bodies and their influences, of the medical understanding of the human body as corresponding to the body of nature, of the unity of the cosmos as a model for political unity on earth, and so on and so forth, Dong Zhongshu was mainly responsible for turning Confucianism into a state-sanctioned orthodoxy. Many modern scholars agree that theorizing about the "unity of heaven and man" is indeed "the most basic feature and the main pillar of Dong Zhongshu's Confucian teaching".[8] The core of Dong's cosmology "is the correspondence between heaven and man, and its goal is essentially political".[9] Indeed, in a major work attributed to him – *Chun qiu fan lu* or *Exuberant Dews of the Spring and Autumn* – and his other writings, Dong Zhongshu put forward a cosmological as well as a political theory, or a systematic theory of government based on the correlations between heaven and man, formulated as a strict and orderly hierarchy of social status and political power. This cosmological and political theory has such a profound influence on Chinese history and culture that no discussion of the idea of the "unity of heaven and man" can ignore its argument.

In Dong's argument, heaven is the highest authority, the ultimate source of social and political power, the authority that provides the political power on earth with a kind of divine legitimacy. The way power operates is strictly hierarchical, and the hierarchy, as typical of Confucian teachings, has a moral basis in family relationships. Dong Zhongshu writes:

> The son of heaven takes orders from heaven; the nobles take orders from the son of heaven; the son takes orders from the father; male and female subordinates take orders from their master; the wife takes orders from her husband. All who take orders revere their superior as heaven; so it can be said that all take orders from heaven.[10]

From this citation we can see clearly that Dong Zhongshu's theory of "heaven and man merging into one" is first and foremost a theory aimed to establish moral authority and political unification in a hierarchical social order and to legitimize that order. In this theoretical frame, the ruler is endowed with the mandate of heaven or the divine right to rule, and the hierarchical relationship between the ruler and his subjects is duplicated in the family and in society at large. Dong builds up an elaborate analogy between heaven and man to argue for their correlation and correspondence. "Heaven uses the numbers of a whole year in making the human body," he says, "so there are three hundred and sixty-six small joints to correspond to the number of days, and twelve big joints to correspond to the number of months. Inside the human body, there are five organs to correspond to the number of five elements. On the outside, there are four limbs to correspond to the number of four seasons." The opening and closing of eyes correspond to day and night; breathing in and out correspond to the blowing of air and winds; sorrow, joy, and the other kinds of mood correspond to the changing condition of the seasons. In all these correspondences, man and heaven are seen as similar to one another; if heaven assumes the shape of an anthropomorphic god, man is also turned into a miniature universe. "The human body," as Dong puts it, "is like that of heaven".[11] Because of such perfect correspondences, one can understand the abstract and the general by looking at the concrete and the particular. As Dong argues, "one can display the visible to reveal the invisible, and take the countable to reveal the uncountable. That is to say, the way to understand should be looking at the correspondence of categories, just like looking at what is visible, and examining the matching of numbers."[12] That may explain

the importance of observing the movement of heavenly bodies, recording natural calamities and any unusual things or events as signs and omens. That may also highlight the necessity of interpreting what one has observed, the close relationships of hermeneutics with politics and ethics, the necessity of understanding the will of heaven through proper reading of natural signs. "All calamities have their roots," says Dong, "in the defects of a state." Natural calamities serve as heaven's warnings sent to man; therefore, those who rule "must endeavor to see the will of heaven through calamities".[13]

Whatever happens in heaven is correlated with and has influence on the human world – that is indeed an old idea in China, but that idea, or what we would now call astrology, is by no means uniquely Chinese. Observing stars or heavenly bodies as a way to understand the will of heaven is a common practice in almost all ancient civilizations. "God invented and gave us sight to the end that we might behold the courses of intelligence in the heaven, and apply them to the courses of our own intelligence which are akin to them." This may sound like Dong Zhongshu, but actually here is Plato speaking.[14] In ancient time, observation of heavenly bodies and recording of their movements often serve a divinatory purpose. Geoffrey Lloyd has discussed the investigation of heavenly bodies in ancient Mesopotamia, China, and Greece, and noticed that in all three civilizations there was the belief that "the heavens sent messages that bore on human destinies, not determining their fate, but rather sent as warnings that the wise should take into account".[15] That is exactly what Dong Zhongshu says about natural calamities. "When the defects of the state first start," says Dong, "heaven would send calamities as warnings. If such warnings do not make the state to change its ways, strange things would appear to strike fear in men's hearts, but if men are not frightened and do not know fear, catastrophes would come as punishment".[16] The striking similarities here in understanding calamities as warnings sent by heaven, which we find in Greece as well as in China, lead us to the realization that the correlation

of heavenly bodies with the human body, of natural phenomena with the human world, or the "unity of heaven and man," is not a uniquely Chinese idea, but can also be found in the West from antiquity, the medieval time, up to and even beyond the eighteenth century. Such a "holistic" view of the natural and the human world as a world of order, hierarchy, and correspondences has been famously discussed in such classic works as Arthur Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* and E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Perhaps the Western concept of *The Great Chain of Being* may be more systematically religious, but evidently in both Chinese and Western cultures, the various correspondences between heaven and man, or macrocosm and microcosm, connect everything in the universe with everything else, thus offering the rich opportunity for cross-cultural comparative studies.

We have seen Dong Zhongshu describing the human body as corresponding numerically to the four seasons, the twelve months, the three hundred sixty-six days in a year and so forth. In a way this is also how the Western concept of correspondences link man and the universe together in a perfect match, for "man's very anatomy corresponded with the physical ordering of the universe," says Tillyard in quoting many textual examples to prove that in traditional Western understanding, there was this "physical correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm".[17] The Western idea of man as a microcosm or a little world modeled on macrocosm or the world of nature, the metaphor of the body politic, and the idea of man as somehow special and distinct from all other animals and creatures – all these have parallel expressions in Dong Zhongshu's works.

For example, the Western concept of the body politic, a conceptual metaphor that can be traced back to Plato and clearly articulated by John of Salisbury (c. 1120–1180) in the twelfth century, has a similar expression in Chinese political thinking. According to John of Salisbury, the king is "the head in the republic," the senate its heart, "judges and governors of provinces" perform "duties of the ears, eyes and mouth,"

officials and soldiers are the hands, while those who assist the king are "comparable to the flanks".[18] Li Gang (1083–1140), a Chinese statesman of the Song dynasty, also described the state or "all under heaven" as "just one human body. The royal house inside is the heart, offices outside reaching in four directions are the four limbs, and laws, rules, and penal codes are the veins and arteries".[19] This of course reminds us of Dong Zhongshu's description of the human body as similarly constituted as that of heaven or the universe in an essentially social and political theory.

It is true that man as God's favorite creation is clearly acknowledged in the Bible to be a special being above his environment, who would "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). This biblical elevation of man above all other creatures, together with the idea that "God created man in his own image" (Gen. 1:27), proves to be extremely important for the rise of humanism during the Renaissance, but it may also have caused those "Asian values" advocates to blame the West for a human-centered ideology that pits man against nature, and for an aggressive "Western way of thinking" bent on conquering nature and destroying man's harmonious relationship with it. As we have seen earlier, those critics seem to argue that man in Chinese or Eastern culture is completely at peace with nature and not above any other creature, and that the "unity of heaven and man" puts man on an equal footing with everything else in the universe. When we check such a claim with Dong Zhongshu's works, however, we find it completely wrong and false. "Man is above and beyond all ten thousand things," Dong Zhongshu declares in no ambiguous terms, "and is thus the noblest of all under heaven".[20] "When we look at the human body," he says, "how much higher above everything else it is, and how much closer to heaven!" He goes on to argue that because other creatures take less of the essence of heaven and earth, when compared with human beings, they all are shaped in such a way as to bend down or prostrate when

they move, while "man alone stands erect and is truly worthy".[21] To relate the upright human shape with man's worth and dignity may remind us of John Milton's great encomium of Adam and Eve, the first two human beings created in God's image in the Garden of Eden. In Book 4 of his great epic *Paradise Lost*, Milton thus describes the first couple:

> Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
> Godlike erect, with native Honor clad
> In naked Majesty seem'd Lords of all,
> And worthie seem'd, for in thir looks Divine
> The image of thir glorious Maker shone.
>
> (*Paradise Lost*, iv. 288–292)

The appreciation of man as the noblest and superior creature on earth is indeed shared by both the humanistic tradition in the West and by the Confucian tradition in China. Dong Zhongshu definitely put man on top of all other creatures under heaven. In fact, Confucian teachings are clearly human-centered. As we read in the *Analects*, when Confucius came back home one day and found the stable in his house burned down in a fire, he immediately asked: "Is anybody hurt?" But he did not ask about the horses. For him, the supreme virtue of *ren* or benevolence meant nothing but to "love human beings".[22] To put human beings above other creatures, however, does not necessarily mean to destroy the balance between man and nature, and it is misleading to insist that either you have to conquer and destroy nature or you must give up all human interests and desires to preserve nature. Such an "either or" opposition is false and unhelpful, serving only to intensify the cultural differences and confrontations between the East and the West. What we need in our world today is an open-minded acceptance of different perspectives and views that bring to us the best of all cultures. In fact, in the world's great cultures and traditions, we can find ideas, insights, and visions that are fundamentally commensurate and mutually enriching, and it is the task for a scholar and an intellectual to recognize the

values of humanity's common ideas, insights, and visions and promote the mutual understanding, rather than the confrontation, of Asia and Europe, the East and the West. It is not so much Asian values as human values that we must learn to appreciate, and in this effort, cross-cultural understanding offers the hope of true knowledge, the hope of humanity's more peaceful and promising future.

Thank you!

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NOTER

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2. Ibid., p. 83.
3. Ibid., p. 84.
4. Ibid.
5. Sun Yirang (1848–1908), *Mozi jiangu* [*Annotations on the Mozi*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Distinguished Philosophical Works*], 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1954), vol. 4, p. 123.
6. Huang Pumin, *Tian ren he yi: Dong Zhongshu yu Handai ruxue sichao* [*Unity of Heaven and Man: Dong Zhongshu and Confucian Thoughts in the Han Dynasty*] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1999), p. 64.
7. Guo Qingfan (1844–1895?), *Zhuangzi jishi* [*Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Distinguished Philosophical Works*], vol. 3, pp. 219–220.
8. Huang Pumin, *Tian ren he yi: Dong Zhongshu yu Handai ruxue sichao* [*Unity of Heaven and Man: Dong Zhongshu and Confucian Thoughts in the Han Dynasty*], p. 76. For a study in English of Dong's contribution to the institutionalization of Confucianism during the Han dynasty, see Sarah A. Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn, according to Tung Chung-shu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

9. Zhou Guidian, *Dong xue tan wei* [*Exploring the Intricacies of Dong Zhongshu's Doctrine*] (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1989), p. 61. Huang Pumin makes an effort to differentiate Dong's theory of the "unity of heaven and man" from an earlier idea of the "correspondence between heaven and man," but that difference comes down to little more than the fact that Dong's theory is more systematic and more developed than earlier ones. See Huang, *Tian ren he yi* [*Unity of Heaven and Man*], pp. 83–86. In this essay, I shall not focus on such a minute difference and treat the two as similar and closely related ideas.
10. Dong Zhongshu, *Chun qiu fan lu* [*Exuberant Dews of the Spring and Autumn*], annotated by Ling Shu (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1937), chap. 70, p. 241.
11. Ibid., chap. 56, p. 205.
12. Ibid., pp. 205–206.
13. Ibid., chap. 30, p. 144.
14. Plato, *Timaeus* 47bc, trans. Benjamin Jowett, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 1175.
15. G.E.R. Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 20.
16. Dong Zhongshu, *Chun qiu fan lu* [*Exuberant Dews of the Spring and Autumn*], chap. 30, p. 144.
17. E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 68.
18. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, 5:2, in Cary J. Nederman and Kate Langdon Forhan (eds.), *Medieval Political Theory – A Reader: The Quest for the Body Politic, 1100–1400* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 38. See also Plato, *Republic* V.464b, *The Collected Dialogues*, p. 703.
19. Li Gang, "On Curing the State," *Liangxi ji* [*Li Gang's Collected Writings*], *juan* 157, in *Siku quanshu* [*Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1987 reprint), vol. 1126, pp. 683b–684a.
20. Dong Zhongshu, *Chun qiu fan lu* [*Exuberant Dews of the Spring and Autumn*], chap. 81, p. 277.
21. Ibid., chap. 56, p. 204.
22. Liu Baonan (1791–1855), *Lunyu zhengyi* [*The Correct Meaning of the Analects*], x.17, xii.22, in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Distinguished Philosophical Works*], vol. 1, pp. 228, 278.